Rethinking the art and craft of green politics

REHABILITATING THE CULTURE OF RHETORIC FOR A MORE INCLUSIVE AND INSPIRING FORM OF ECOPOLITICAL PRACTICE

Aidan Davison is a Lecturer in Sustainable Development and Program Chair in the Institute for Sustainability and Technology Policy at Murdoch University in Perth
a_daviso@central.murdoch.edu.au

Martin Mulligan is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Ecology and Lifelong Learning at the University of Western Sydney
m.mulligan@uws.edu.au

... moral knowledge must always be a kind of experience
Hans-Georg Gadamer 1975

ABSTRACT

A strong showing for the Greens was the only bright note in the otherwise dismal Australian federal elections of 2001. While the Greens have been able to take advantage of growing public cynicism towards prevailing political practices and discourses, they must also be wary of the same tide of cynicism and seek to build forms of political practice that are both more inclusive and more inspiring. While green political theorists are doing important work on critically reviewing the traditions and institutions of liberal democracies, this paper joins with philosophers such as Val Plumwood (2002) in calling for a more deep-seated cultural renaissance of ecological reason within green political thought. In particular, it suggests a need to adopt a broader conception of 'reason' and a much better understanding of the art of rhetorical political discourse, and it urges greens to celebrate the 'wisdom' of lived experience while working on the neglected skills of eloquence that might enable us to give voice to our experiences of a 'more-than-human' world. It seeks to counterpose a 'poetic politics' to the increasingly discredited 'pragmatic politics' and suggests some projects that might give expression to the form of political practice that the authors adovcate.

INTRODUCTION

From our perspective, only two positive things came out of the otherwise dismal November 2001 federal election in Australia. One was the demise, at least for now, of Pauline Hanson, although with all the major parties (including Labor) taking up aspects of her agenda we now have Hansonism without Hanson; a mixed blessing at best. The more unambiguously positive thing that emerged was the more than doubling of the vote for the Greens nationally. The jump in support for the Greens comes at a time when 'progressive' political ideas appear to be in retreat in Australia, yet the mix of environmental and social justice ideas that the Greens

promoted found a resonance. The youthful Kerry Nettle of New South Wales joins Greens leader Bob Brown in the Senate (where they will share the balance of power with the Australian Democrats) and there is guaranteed electoral funding tied to the size of the vote that will strengthen the party organisationally. Following setbacks at the previous two federal elections, the Greens appear to have turned the tide, and have built a good platform for an expansion of their parliamentary representation in the future. Undoubtedly, the Greens attracted disaffected Labor voters in this election and *could* lose many of them back to Labor at the next, but it seems safe to say that the Greens have re-established themselves as a serious minor party, rivalling the Democrats in the role of a 'third force'. This should ensure that environmental politics — in the broad meaning that the Greens give to it — will remain a force in public political discourse.

The resolute leadership of Bob Brown — surely one of the most skilful politicians in Australia — had a lot to do with the good result for the Greens. It is interesting that the most perceptive post-election comment came from the director of the organisational wing of the Liberal Party, Lynton Crosby, who, in a telling attack on Labor, said that voters had rewarded what he called 'conviction politicians'. Crosby, of course, suggested that John Howard is a conviction politician — we would dispute that, because the campaign suggested he is willing to do just about anything to retain power. Yet somehow he manages to convey the *impression* that he has serious convictions. However, Crosby also singled out Bob Brown, and that is highly significant, because it suggests that even Brown's enemies are prepared to admit that he has real integrity and is able to speak from the heart as well as the head. In an age of poll-driven 'pragmatists', he is seen as being refreshingly forthright and honest.

The success of the Greens has again confirmed the importance of bringing together the two agendas of environmental sustainability and social justice. This synergy of green and 'red' agendas has been at the heart of green politics in Australia ever since Dick Jones and others formed the world's first green party — the United Tasmania Group — in 1972 (Mulligan and Hill 2001, pp. 243–50). It owes much to the influence on the Greens in both Australia and Europe of the 'green bans' movement led by the Sydney trade union leader Jack Mundey in the early 1970s (ibid, pp. 263–70). In his early years, as a powerful advocate for 'wilderness' and as a member of the Tasmanian Parliament, Bob Brown was frequently criticised for promoting wilderness preservation above all social concerns; however, in recent years, in his role as leader of the Australian Greens, he has been able to give voice to the combined agenda of environmental responsibility and social justice in ways that have attracted a broad interest. He has been able to show that it is possible, indeed essential, to affirm both ecological and social values. He has thus been able to effectively sidestep the long-standing and tiresome confrontation between those who represent '*ecocentric*' (used here in a broad sense) and '*humanitarian*' concerns as somehow mutually exclusive and who can only articulate their passion for one through heated opposition to the other.

It is comforting to know that Bob Brown is on hand to now mentor a new young senator and to oversee the potential growth of the party. From the time he co-ordinated the national campaign to save Tasmania's Franklin River, Brown has excelled as an organiser and political strategist (ibid, chapter 10). Not only is he seen as being a man of integrity and vision: also he is widely admired for being able to 'mix it' with the (mainly) boys in the 'big house on the hill' — that glorified bunker in Canberra. He is seen as being able to stand for something and 'play the game' at the same time. But, of course, this kind of politics is anything but *inclusive*. The underlying message is, 'Do the work to get your representatives into the bunker, but then leave it to them to play the game on your behalf.'

It is a politics of trust, and very often voters have had their trust betrayed. In Australia we have a very refined form of corporatist politics, with politicians and various lobby groups battling it out over the fine print of policy documents, and; occasionally resorting to the 'court of public opinion' to put pressure on others engaged in the game. Because of the nature of this 'game', it is a narrow form of discourse. The gradual adoption of the scientific ideal of objective and universalisable argument into the core of conventional western political discourse has produced a strong perceived need for an appearance of certainty. The resultant art of this kind of categorical politics is to convince voters that 'we' have 'a plan' that is based on the best 'expertise' available and which can be pragmatically implemented without affecting the existing flow and concentration of social power: what might be dubbed the 'art of the already possible'. Without diminishing the art that is involved in this, it is easy to see that the greatest skill is in 'selling' the plan, so that politicians become ideas salespersons. Hence, marketing, no different in kind from that used to sell toothpaste, becomes the first and last resort of political strategists. The range of 'realistic' policy options narrows to those that further entrench existing hierarchical structures. In this art there is little or no room for ambiguity, uncertainty, or even an acknowledgement of the unknown. Practitioners must simplify complexity so that they can stay 'on message' in 30 second media 'grabs'. It is a disaster to admit that you may not know 'the answer' or that things are so complex that a short answer is not possible. This is not, of course, a problem unique to Australian politics;Manuel Castells (1997) argues that the media is largely to blame for trivialising political discourse in all western democracies.

There are, of course, some things a political party can do *organisationally* to consult more broadly on the issues being debated in Canberra, thereby highlighting the diversity of interests and views in the community and exposing the narrowness of focus of mainstream political visions. However, the political 'game' that parliamentarians are engaged in is fast moving, and the time and space for consultation is limited; a high degree of trust must be given to elected representatives. Those with a strong interest in environmental issues can be reassured that people like Brown and Nettle are able to monitor and influence national debate and legislative change. But the Greens need to be as aware as any political party that another big trend in Australian politics is a growing public cynicism about this game and about *all* politicians, including the Greens, because trust has been abused so frequently.

RECOVERING REASON

Simply to claim that cynicism has taken hold of the imagination of electors and representatives alike in many liberal democracies is, sadly, merely to reinforce a drab and unilluminating truism. Without denying that this phenomenon has many, interrelated causes, we think this cynicism can be usefully explored by opening up the question of political rationality. There are, of course, innumerable ways in which this question can be framed. We shall concern ourselves here with the specific question of whether the increasing pressure on political actors to claim an inflexible, absolute certainty for their views is contributing to the growing lack of an explicit ethical rationale for political practice. Certainly, this pressure contributes to the now routine spectacle of politicians unblushingly switching (or 'back-flipping') from 'argument' to 'counter-argument' in the space of a few days — days, commonly, of intense media pressure and scrutiny — without any explicit process of rational deliberation or mediation capable of making this transition intelligible to the public. Equally, this pressure helps explain why political debate often proceeds as the clash of rigidly opposed views, each seeking the (high) ground of 'proven truth', and why ambiguity, tentativeness and uncertainty are taken as signs of weakness in such political discourse.

A less obvious, yet perhaps even more important consequence of this pressure, however, is that it brings with it demands that make moral deliberation all but impossible in political debate. Political rationality becomes understood as a derivative of calculus, a kind of maths of social life in which 'bottom lines' are everything, while moral reasoning retreats into the subjective spaces of 'private' life, where it is understood less as an expression of rationality than as form of personal preference. This has two important consequences. First, those ethical assumptions that are sedimented within late-modern liberal democratic institutions are left unexamined. Second, it confronts those political movements with explicit agendas for ethical change, such as the greens, with the dilemma that political credibility can be gained only at the cost of adopting discourses that deny the rational dimension of the motivating visions of the movement, making them appear driven by the whim of undisciplined and incoherent sentiment.

Pierre Bourdieu's description of the problem faced by political movements that run counter to the hegemony of late-modern capitalism more generally is characteristically helpful:

> *One of the difficulties of the political struggle today is that the dominants, technocrats or epistemocrats on the right or the left are hand in glove with reason and the universal: one makes one's way through universes in which more and more technical, rational justifications will be necessary in order to dominate and in which the dominated can and must also use reason to defend themselves against domination, because the dominants must increasingly invoke reason, and science, to exert their domination* (1998, pp. 90).

The 'ritualised combat' of adversarial politics is based on quasi-scientific appeals to rationality, with the irony of steamed-up politicians aggressively berating their opponents for being 'emotive' commonplace. The apparent clash of reason and emotion, fact and value, in political discourse has contributed to the unhelpful polarisation of environmental movements into rationalist ('realo' or light green) approaches and anti-rationalist ('fundi' or dark green) factions. Of particular note is the fact that the political resonance of the language of sustainable development of the 1980s and 1990s has facilitated a distinctly modernist redefinition of environmentalist concerns. This redefinition has given impetus to a rationalist, 'ecomodernist' agenda for the technocratic management of nature that has the potential to marginalise broader environmental agendas in the early decades of this century (Davison 2001).

There are, of course, many green political theorists who have grappled with the dominance of technocratric agendas and instrumentalist rationality in western liberal democracies. John Dryzek, for example, has argued that liberal democratic states came into existence to nurture the conditions for the growth of capitalism and thus that 'the first task of any liberal democratic state must always be to secure and maintain profitable conditions for business' (1996a, p. 15). However, he goes on to argue that the narrow conception of rationality that underpins this conception of democracy can be challenged by an oppositional civil society, and relies on Jurgen Habermas' conception of 'communicative rationality' to argue that the framework of public discourse can be radically broadened in order to create a 'strong' or 'discursive' democracy capable of addressing the challenges posed by major environmental concerns (1996b). Similarly, Ulrich Beck (1995) has argued that the problem-solving instrumentalities that created liberal democracies — science, technology, and industry — are now posing the greatest risks, and that we now live in a risk-denying society that has lost its problem-solving capacity. Beck hopes that a new focus on ecological risks will foster the creation of a more 'reflexive democracy' in which 'dissenting voices', 'alternative experts' and 'public science' can revitalise the institutions of liberal democracies (1998). He calls for the democratisation of all civic spheres — family, business, industry, labour, science — and sees an important role for what he calls 'subpolitics' — groups and movements located 'outside the political or corporatist system' (1997, p. 113).

Important as this work on democratic theory is, our focus here is on more deep-seated cultural sources of the philosophical narrowness of prevailing political discourse within western democracies. This leads us to join with Val Plumwood (2002) in searching for a kind of cultural renaissance of ecological reason within green political thought. In one sense this task might seem more intimidating and less pragmatic than that tackled by people like Dryzek and Beck, yet, paradoxically, we will argue that it plays to the potential strengths of emerging green politics and provides more immediate scope for revitalising green political activism.

For us the starting point is that the decoupling of broad cultural concerns about nature from debates about environmental policy is a direct result of the cultural assumptions encoded within the modernist representation of political reason as value-neutral. Unfortunately, the problem here is all too often misunderstood as being a problem with rationality itself, rather than a problem with a particular, historical representation of human capacities for reason. The claim by many ecophilosophers, such as Plumwood, that the dominance of 'rationality' in western modes of thought has been largely responsible for the alienation of humans from the non-human world is often misunderstood as supporting the view that ecological salvation lies in a rejection of reason. Plumwood's critical attention is on a specific western project of reason that gained mature expression in the epistemological method of René Descartes, but whose beginnings can be traced as far back as Plato. The defining feature of this method is that is considers the world as a mindless collection of raw materials valuable only insofar as they serve human purposes. Reality is understood only instrumentally, according to Plumwood, because the hegemonic logic of dualism that is central to this method structures theoretical understanding through the creation of binary oppositions of 'master' and 'slave' concepts. Within such a logical structure, or epistemological paradigm, mind is polarised from, and elevated over, body: male, culture, reason and fact are polarised from, and elevated over, female, nature, emotion and value (Plumwood 1993).

To return for a moment to the nitty gritty of contemporary politics, we can begin to see more of the cultural sources of the pressure on politicians to dis-integrate their value convictions and their intellectual convictions. Those who know Bob Brown, or who have followed his career, for example, know that when you get him out of 'the halls of power' and into the bush his ability to 'speak from the heart' includes a very impressive capacity to speak evocatively and inspirationally about what the 'more-than-human' world means to him. Even here he tends to be a salesman of ideas — that is just a part of his personality — but he is able to 'indulge in' non-instrumental language and become 'philosophical' rather than 'rational'. Of course this is not the Bob Brown that would be treated respectfully in the political process, nor the persona that the news media is interested in, although it might emerge as a human interest story into 'the person behind the politician', and therein lies a problem. Emotion and value are relegated to the private domain; the sensitive (perhaps 'feminine') side of a public figure's persona is relegated to 'background' articles and commentary that are not considered to be part of serious political debate.

More generally, green politicians and green lobbyists have a constant battle on their hands to 'prove' that they should not be dismissed as irrelevant, unworldly, and irrational 'tree-huggers'. There are many opportunities for the anti-environment movement (which may be more covert these days, but is still very powerful — see Beder 2000) to discredit and thus marginalise the green voice. But that is the perennial problem of radical politics. And herein lies the art — how to make a difference without being co-opted; how to be radical without being irrelevant? So, how can Greens make a difference within a political discourse that privileges instrumentalist rationality and simplistic certainty?

THE INTEGRITY OF INCONSISTENCY

Our response to these questions is based on the view that green political movements must seek to make explicit the fact that they are motivated and informed by a conception of ethical practice that is very different in character from that which underpins the dominant instrumentalist rationality of liberal democracies. One consequence of the move of green political agendas from the periphery to the centre of liberal democratic discourse and practice, therefore, is that incoherence and inconsistency will inevitably arise when greens attempt to express their different ethical aspirations within the prevailing instrumentalist frameworks. However, rather than shying away from this 'problem', we think that green political movements need to face the challenge openly and give greater expression to the 'intensifying' moral experience of inconsistency that arises with the lived juxtaposition of ecological values and modernist regimes of power. There is great integrity in resisting the schizophrenic forces that would split us into private and public, subjective and objective modes. We should celebrate the increasing experience of dissonance that arises with the movement of ecological sensibilities ever closer towards the centres of modernist power — be they houses of parliament, corporate headquarters, television studios, laboratories, lecture halls or whatever. More than this, however, we need to give positive expression to the logic or integrity of this dissonance as we seek to make political those forms of practical reasoning that are grounded in our everyday experience of complex and integrated social and ecological webs. Our lived experience at the edge of change is never neat and tidy, and we should resist the pressures that want to make it so.

Recognition of the co-evolution of practices and values, and of the practical rationality through which the integrity of our moral experience can be spoken, has been gaining increasing force and clarity since the 1970s within a number of streams of praxis philosophy. Most notable in this regard are the fields of communitarian ethics, feminist ethics, hermeneutics, pragmatism, and poststructuralist sociology (see, for example, MacIntyre 1984; Taylor 1989; Gilligan 1982; Gadamer 1975; Bernstein 1983; Bourdieu 1998). However, the subject of forms of practical reason that shed light on the complexities of everyday experience has been, until very recently, ignored by environmental movements. As Anthony Weston observed in his still relevant 1992 paper '*Before Environmental Ethics*', discussions in environmental scholarship have largely neglected the fact that ethical ideas are 'deeply interwoven with and dependent upon multiple contexts: other prevailing ideas and values, cultural institutions and practices, a vast range of experiences, and natural settings as well' (Weston 1992, p. 312). That is, environmentalists have, all too often, failed to bring an ecological conception of causation to bear on their understanding of ethics and political practices.

Nonetheless, the resources for a comprehensive articulation of practical, as opposed to technical, epistemologies capable of holding together ethical aspirations and political practices do already exist within environmental thought. It is interesting to note, for example, that Fritz Schumacher's critique of economics and technology in *Small is Beautiful* (1973) — a critique influential in shaping green ethics and practice over three decades — has gained vastly more attention than his equally interesting observations about the differences between convergent (or logical) and divergent (or existential) problems in his 1977 *A Guide for the Perplexed*. In this 'guidebook', Schumacher wisely reminded environmentalists and others that in our search for a 'new' ethics we must not forget that we 'are dealing with divergent problems, which call not for new inventions but for the development of man's [sic] higher faculties and their application' (1977, p. 131). We must not forget, in other words, that 'new' social ethics are not produced in the intellect, but evolve slowly within the interlinked multiplicities of a world of practice.

An ecological understanding of the connections between ideas and values in the evolution of political practices focuses our attention on the fact that those of us embedded in technological late modernity exist in a cultural space between the modernist project of dominating nature and ecopolitically sustainable successor societies. Located as we are in a cultural space before environmental ethics, in the space of proto-environmental ethics, the chief function of ethical green political discourse is 'to provoke, to loosen up the language, and correspondingly our thinking, to fire the imagination: to open questions, not to settle them' (Weston 1992, p. 332). Rather than needing theoretical finality, in preparation for a fight to the death with the anti-environmental ethics of the present in parliamentary 'question time', green political movements need to be prepared for a long period of ethical experimentation and uncertainty. As Weston so ably puts it, our dominant ethical experience in this space is 'of a variety of fairly incompatible outlines coupled with a wide range of proto-practices' (ibid, p. 333). Green political movements exist in the revolutionary space between political paradigms where the value certainties of the past are dissolving and the possibilities for new ethical values and practices are only skeletal and experimental.

REHABILITATING RHETORIC

How, then, can green political movements engage in the political paradigm of the present — within which sustainability can only ever be understood as another imperative for greater technological efficiency, albeit the more hopeful imperative of 'eco-efficiency' — yet still remain open to the broader concerns out of which new cultural visions of sustainability will grow? An interesting response to this question, or so we think, is to be found in the observation that the western world has a potentially richer legacy in regard to modes of thought and communication than we often think. Certainly it is true that Plato and Aristotle were 'the fathers' of the 'logical' tradition of thought that subsequently became the foundation of the modern scientific project of mastering nature. But what is largely ignored is that both of them, but especially Aristotle, pointed out that the 'tool' of logic in either of its theoretical (*episteme*) or technical (*techne*) modes is only useful for solving a narrow range of clearly defined problems and that it is of little use for addressing more complex and ambiguous questions in social affairs.

The mode of logic, or reason, most directly concerned with matters of evaluation, rather than description, Aristotle called *phronesis*. Often translated as prudence or practical wisdom, *phronesis* is a state of consciousness that integrates moral character and intelligence (Dunne 1993, pp. 275–77). Whereas one may possess sophisticated knowledge about the physical world or the practical arts and yet be of 'bad' intent, according to Aristotle, to be possessed of practical wisdom is to be possessed, simultaneously, of honesty, courage and compassion. This co-arising of intellectual clarity and ethical virtue is not an abstract, cognitive process. It emerges out of direct experience of a world of practice, and it gains expression through social *praxis*, or relational action. Indeed, 'it is a particular type of experience' that moves from particulars to universals, rather than the other way around (ibid, p. 295). Practical reason, the articulation of practical wisdom, is thus not practical in the sense of being able to be applied to practice but in the more fundamental sense of arising out of practice itself (see Davison 2001, pp. 160–68).

Aristotle's description of practical reason, and the form of action, *praxis*, in which it is embodied, stands at the centre of a tradition of practical philosophy in western thought that is central to many Christian traditions that were marginalised by the 'enlightenment' turn to Cartesian epistemology four centuries ago (MacIntyre 1984). The many varieties of praxis philosophy that have re-emerged over the last 50 years represent an important resurgence of

this tradition and a gradual process of decentring instrumentalist narratives. It is surprising, then, that within the breadth of Aristotle's corpus (in reality, a much massaged collection of student's lecture notes) that practical reason is discussed only in a short passage in Book VI of *Nicomechean Ethics* [1140b 12–33], while his concept of *techne* or technical reason is much more pervasive, if developed unevenly and inconsistently (Dunne 1993, pp. 237–74).
The lack of any direct mention of practical reason in his *Politics* and *Rhetoric*, in particular, has encouraged scholars to regard political reason as an art of the production of meaning (*techne*) quite different in kind to the art from meaningful practice (*phronesis*). Eugene Garver's 1994 *Aristotle's Rhetoric* offers a welcome challenge to this view by arguing that Aristotle's highly developed concept of rhetoric needs to be understood as a specific expression of practical reason. In its essence, explains Garver, rhetoric is a political practice that unites intelligence, character and eloquence. And indeed, without an awareness of this essence, it is difficult if not impossible to distance rhetoric from sophistry; a problem that beset classical and Christian scholars alike and, as we shall argue below, may explain the contemporary pejorative conception of the very idea of rhetoric.

The contrast in *Politics*, then, between 'two roads to truth' — formal logic and the 'art' of rhetoric — should not be understood as a contrast between reason and unreason, but between one form of reason that relates only to intellectual powers and another form of reason in which moral concerns, concerns embracing feelings and intuitions, are inextricable from intellectual concerns about what is 'right to do' and 'good to be'. In other words, the construction and sharing of rhetorical arguments that resonate with emotional experience as much as with intellectual insight is the pathway that is more relevant to the discussion of complex political and ethical affairs.

The Roman scholar Cicero later expanded on this point by arguing that rhetorical debate aimed at moving people to take action is the only way to create a meaningful public discourse about civic affairs (Golsby-Smith 2001). He illustrated this by saying that if we (ie, Romans) are to answer the question, 'How should Carthage be governed?', we cannot do so in a 'logical' way but rather by stimulating an inclusive debate that appeals to underlying values and motivational visions. Of course in the city-state of Athens in particular, the art of speech-making was highly valued, and a skilled rhetorician knew how to engage his (always his) audience by appealing to the heart and soul, using evocative language and imagery. And the best of the speech-makers went head-to-head in public forums trying to demonstrate the motivational power of their art. It was an open form of public discourse that aimed to make 'progress' in very non-linear ways; more like zig-zags, cycles, leaps and regressions. The creation of a *resonance* between the art of eloquence and shared experience was the aim of this game.

It is very interesting that the very word 'rhetoric' has become so devalued in western cultures which have drawn so many of their foundational concepts from the ancient Greeks. To say, 'oh that's just rhetorical' is to suggest that the author of the statement is being shallow and manipulative, probably even deceitful. We don't admire people who are skilled rhetoricians. Nonetheless, the most effective politicians use rhetoric all the time. John Howard, for example, used it all the time in his shameless appeals to selfish values in the recent Australian election campaign and George Bush (the junior) is using it all the time in his discourse about the crusade between 'good and (the axis of) evil'. Of course if their opponents counter with rhetorical flair of their own, Howard and Bush are the first to say that we must 'stick to the facts' and eschew emotion. In our view, rhetoric can be very dangerous if it is reduced to sophistry through the dualism of reason and emotion designed to allow only a few — those at the centre of social power — to speak with authority. It would be much better if the art of rhetoric could be publicly rehabilitated, so that we all become more skilled in assessing the arguments of those who use it and so that more public discussion could escape the constraints of dry, instrumental rationality

to become more evocative and potentially more inspiring. There is a growing core of academics (especially in the US) who are trying to rehabilitate rhetoric in the west; perhaps green politicians in countries such as Australia and New Zealand are in a position to join this endeavour by openly modelling the art of rhetoric in their political discourse, knowing that it helps rebalance the conception of reason that western cultures have taken from Greek philosophy.

TOWARDS A 'POETIC POLITICS'

However, it is not enough, we want to stress, to learn how to enrich political discourse with an open and unapologetic use of rhetorical 'flourish'. More deeply understood, rhetoric opens up a capacity to bind together the *art* of expression with practical wisdom. What has been devalued most in the dry political discourse of western liberal democracies is the art and craft of eloquence; the skilled use of a language that can resonate as much as convince. To recapture eloquence is to rehabilitate Aristotle's *poiesis*, his sense that the world can speak, eloquently, through human skill, whether that be the skill of language, of song, of building, of growing, or whatever. To recapture eloquence is to draw together political debate and our rich traditions of artistic expression, traditions rarely seen as being of direct relevance to political discourse.

The great Australian poet and conservation activist Judith Wright often came under fire from literary critics for using her art to convey political messages (for example, RF Brissenden, as cited by Brady 2001). Even she worried, at times, that the demands of activism robbed her of the energy needed to turn out quality poetry, and she famously advised Patrick White to be cautious about his incursions into political discourse (see Bonyhady 2000). However, it is widely acknowledged that the eloquence of her art was linked to her extraordinary capacity to empathise with both non-human nature and with the experience and worldviews of Australian indigenous society (Mulligan and Hill 2001, pp. 91–105) and late in her life she argued that skilful and effective activists are both more rare and more important than budding poets (Bonyhady 2000). The real power of Wright's legacy, in our view, was that she was able to *combine* artistic eloquence with skilful activism; a convergence of practical empathy and linguistic skill that would be difficult to match but possible to emulate.

There are, of course, a multitude of Judith Wright's poems that we might cite at this point. For our purpose here, however, consider the powerful and resonant poem called simply *Australia 1970*, written at a time when the nation was celebrating the bicentennial of Captain Cook's arrival.

The poem begins with the verse:

> *Die, wild country, like the eaglehawk*
> *dangerous till the last breath's gone,*
> *clawing and striking. Die*
> *cursing your captor through a raging eye.*

And it ends with:

> *I praise the scoring drought, the flying dust,*
> *the drying creek, the furious animal,*
> *that they oppose us still;*
> *that we are ruined by the thing we kill.*

Not only was Wright famous for her capacity to empathise with non-human nature; she was also a pioneer of the idea that white Australia will never be 'settled' until it has achieved a meaningful reconciliation with the indigenous people and the brutal history of their colonisation by the settler society. In essence, she argued that white Australians must

decolonise their attitudes towards both the land and the people who have dwelt in it for countless generations. This task is, of course, not an easy one, and its complexity is explored in the forthcoming volume *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for nature conservation in the post-colonial era* (Adams and Mulligan 2002). However, Melbourne-based writer and scholar Paul Carter made an important point that resonates powerfully with Judith Wright's legacy when he suggested that we need a 'poetic politics' in order to dismantle the colonial legacy of trying to linearise the non-linear world (Carter 1996). He made the point rather poetically himself when he wrote:

> *We may say, 'But we walk on the ground', yet we should be aware of an ambiguity. For we walk on the ground as we drive on the road; that is, we move over and above the ground. Many layers come between us and the granular earth — an earth which in any case has already been displaced. Our relationship to the ground is, culturally speaking, paradoxical: for we appreciate it only in so far as it bows down to our will. Let the ground rise up to resist us, let it prove porous, spongy, rough, irregular — let it assert its native title, its right to maintain its traditional surfaces — and instantly our engineering instinct is to wipe it out; to lay our foundations on rationally apprehensible level ground.*
>
> *We do not walk with the surface; we do not align our lives with its inclines, folds and pockets. We glide over it; and to do this, to render what is rough smooth, passive, passable, we linearize it, conceptualizing the ground, indeed the civilized world, as an ideally flat space, whose billiard-table surface can be skated over in any direction without hindrance* (Carter 1996, p. 2).

In his contribution to *Decolonizing Nature*, titled 'Feet to the ground in storied landscapes', one of us (Mulligan 2002) has suggested that a more sensuous reconnection to the land white Australians have attempted to 'conquer' can be achieved by approaching it with more of an aesthetic sensibility and by engaging in a number of deeper cross-cultural dialogues with the landscape literacy so evident in the cosmology of the indigenous Australians. He endorses a call that has been made by others (Borschmann 1999; Garrett 2000) that white Australians need a 'whitefella dreaming' that can bring together a rich collection of stories, myths and songs about our engagement with the land. Coming from the mouths of New Age shamanists, the notion of a whitefella dreaming can be seen as a form of cultural appropriation, a shallow plundering of indigenous people's practices for personal therapy (van Tiggelen 2002). But if it means being inspired by the Aboriginal notion of the dreaming to build *our own* stories and myths that can connect us more intimately to the land, then it can be seen as a deep cultural dialogue. What we should remember is that we would, in fact, be taking back the English word 'dreaming' after it has been enriched and grounded through its immersion in Aboriginal cosmology. Similarly, we might reflect on how the English word 'country' has been used by Aboriginal people to create a much more emotively charged concept than that communicated by the English word 'landscape'. As anthropologist Debbie Bird Rose has explained, Aboriginal people have added new meaning to the word 'country' because, for them it '... is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life' (1996, p. 2). We would like to suggest that one way in which white Australians can enter into a deeper dialogue with the cosmology of the indigenous people is to contemplate the cultural exchange that has been reflected in the ways that Aboriginal people have changed the meaning of particular English words.

Paul Carter (1996) has also made the point that, historically, we need to evaluate the role that artists and writers have played in trying to create a language that enables us to even talk about the irregular and unpredictable world we have tried to linearise. Those engaged in the arts of representation, he suggests, are more likely to have an empathy for the resistance of the land and draw attention, at least, to a perception that all is not right in our relationships with the land. This view is echoed by Mulligan and Hill (2001), who argue that writers and artists were indeed among the first to openly 'discuss' this 'relationship problem' for Australian

settler society and to suggest that white Australians will never feel settled in the land until they allow themselves to be colonised by it, rather than the reverse. However, it is not just a matter of rethinking history; we need to enrich contemporary debates about the ways in which we should manage our relationships with the non-human. The author of the very successful historical novel *Mr Darwin's Shooter*, Roger McDonald, made this point well recently when he was interviewed about his new book, *The Tree in Changing Light*.

Commenting on the way we think about trees, he told journalist Janet Hawley (2001):

> *I worry that in the environmental debate raging about trees, we only seem to hear the botanical and conservation side, with arguments about forest regrowth, acceptable species, trade-offs — it's all in political language.*
>
> *The poetry and mystery of trees, rich in personal experiences of enjoyment and wonder, the private moments of revelation people can feel in forests, when something about trees touches their soul — this more imaginative side rarely gets a mention.*

WHAT CAN THIS MEAN IN PRACTICE?

To return to our starting point, what might this all mean for the political practice of greens who are moving closer to the 'centre' of liberal democratic institutions, like those representing the Greens in the national parliaments of Australia and New Zealand? 'Rhetorical skill' and a 'poetic politics' may sound very nice in theory, but what can they mean in the hurly-burly of political practice? Are we, for example, suggesting that Bob Brown should get up in the Australian Senate and challenge his foes by quoting from a Judith Wright poem or by saying that the answer lies in the deep contemplation of a Russell Drysdale painting? Of course not! We are well aware, for example, that greens continually run the risk of being categorised as belonging to the 'lunatic fringe' that is not capable of engaging with the realities of 'hard politics'. Green politicians such as Bob Brown have to accept certain 'rules of the game' if they are to be heard, and as we said earlier, the movement of greens closer to the centre of power reflects the fact that leaders like Brown have become more adept at playing that game.

In his critical analysis of the experience of an 'accord' between Green politicians and the Labor Party in Tasmania (which kept a minority Labor government in power for a term), Peter Hay (1998) leaves open the question as to whether or not the 'greening' of parliamentary politics is an unachievable pipedream. Certainly, huge cultural clashes come into play and 'idealistic' greens can be as guilty as their opponents of making the dialogue difficult, if not impossible. However, we take heart from the growing public cynicism towards prevailing political practices and we feel that Green politicians in Australia would do well to remember Lynton Crosby's perceptive assessment (mentioned above) that Australian voters are in a mood to reward those who can demonstrate the strength of their convictions. In other words, Greens might be rewarded for 'speaking from the heart' when most politicians are seen as having no heart at all. But it is not simply a matter of speaking from the heart; rather, as we have argued above, it is a matter of broadening the prevailing conception of 'reason', rehabilitating the devalued art of rhetorical discourse, reinforcing the 'wisdom' emanating from praxis, and working on the neglected skills of eloquence that allow the more-than-human to speak within and through us.

As greens generally move close to the 'centre' we need to also maintain some 'peripheral vision' in order to be able to constantly challenge and refresh the stale and oppressive discourses that are so dominant and yet so irrelevant to what matters most to us in our experience. To stretch the metaphor of centre and periphery, we need to be able to move constantly between these 'locations' in order to constantly connect sources of inspiration and creativity with effective interventions in political processes.

But of course those of us who promote a greening of political discourse must not leave it to the elected representatives to challenge the constraints of the prevailing discourse. We need to take more responsibility as a green *movement* for broadening the agenda (partly to give green politicians more room to move) and for demonstrating that unconventional modes of communication can be very effective. Collectively, we need to find ways to bring more imagination, and even 'magic', into our practice and modes of communication. We need to find ways of showing that a shift from the 'politics of pragmatism' to a 'poetic politics' is more than just a catchy alliteration.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to take this point much further. We would like to commend readers to the article by Val Plumwood in *Ecopolitics*, vol. 1, no. 1, which argued for a systematic rethinking of the place names that reflect Australia's colonial history, and the follow-up article by John Cameron in *Ecopolitics*, vol. 1, no. 2, which offered another perspective on the building of a 'place-responsive' society. In our view, these two articles offer some fresh ideas on ways to build more inclusive forms of green political praxis. Following the line of argument in *Ecological Pioneers* (Mulligan and Hill 2001), we also suggest the need to do more *celebrating* of the 'ecological pioneers' — both national and local — whose life stories can be quite inspirational. And while we celebrate the achievements of human pioneers, we might also celebrate the achievements of the non-humans who have managed to defy our conquering hands, sometimes with a bit of human help. One of our favourites in this regard relates to the fact that a bush regeneration project on the Merri Creek in Melbourne created the conditions for the return of Sacred Kingfishers to the area, when these birds had not been sighted in the metropolitan area for many decades. Now the return of these rather special birds is celebrated on an annual basis with the Return of the Kingfisher Festival, a popular cultural event.

We would also like to add a new suggestion: that Australian greens should look to forming a coalition with other groups such as Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR), in order to create an annual Judith Wright Festival that seeks to showcase pioneering work in both conservation and the creative arts, with awards for excellence being allocated in a wide range of categories. Such a festival would have to be held in a location close to Wright's heart — New England, Mt Tamborine, Braidwood, or a rotation between them — and it would, of course, need the consent of Judith's daughter Meredith. But it is not difficult to imagine the impact it could have on the convergence of conservation work and the creative arts.

Maybe we are indulging in a bit of dreaming here, but it is not flippant to note that more dreaming is something we recommend. Furthermore, as that social movement theorist John Lennon once wrote on the subject of dreaming, 'I'm not the only one; I hope some day you'll join us' — because who knows when the seed of an idea might just fall on fertile ground and grow into something that surprises and delights us all. Let us dream on and try to 'dream up' the poetic politics that could put a bit more soul into the very necessary work of green political practice.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adams, WM and Mulligan, Martin (eds), 2002, forthcoming, *Decolonising Nature: Strategies for conservation in a postcolonial era,* Earthscan, London.

Abram, David, 1996, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*, Vintage Books, New York.

Aristotle, 1976, *Ethics: The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. JAK Thomson, revised H Tredennick, intro J Barnes, revised edn, Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, Middlesex.

Beck, Ulirch, 1995, *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Beck, Ulrich, 1997, *The Reinvention of Politics: Rethinking Modernity in the Global Social Order*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Beck, Ulrich, 1998, 'From Industrial Society to the Risk Society: Questions of Survival, Social Structure and Ecological Enlightenment', *Debating the Earth: Environmental Politics Reader*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Bernstein, Richard, 1983, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.

Bonyhady, Tim, 2000, 'Fine Art of Activism', *Spectrum, Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 July, p. 4.

Bourdieu, Pierre, 1998, *Practical Reason: On the theory of Action*, var. trans., Polity Press, Cambridge & Oxford.

Borschmann, Gregg, 1999, *The People's Forest: A Living History of the Australian Bush*, The People's Forest Press Foundation, Blackheath, NSW.

Brady, Veronica, 2001, 'Judith Wright: The Politics of Poetics', *Southerly*, vol. 61, no. 1, p. 82.

Carter, Paul, 1996, *The Lie of the Land*, Faber & Faber, London.

Castells, Manuel, 1997, *The Power of Identity*, Blackwell, Oxford.

Davison, Aidan, 2001, *Technology and the Contested Meanings of Sustainability*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY.

Dryzek, John, 1996a, 'Political and Ecological Communication', *Ecology and Democracy*, Frank Cass, London.

Dryzek, John, 1996b, 'Strategies for Ecological Democratization', *Democracy and the Environment: Problems and Prospects*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, England.

Dunne, Joseph, 1993, *Back to the Rough Ground: 'Phronesis' and 'Techne' in Modern Philosophy and in Aristotle*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame & London.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg, 1975, *Truth and Method*, The Seabury Press, New York.

Garrett, Peter, 2000, 'The Digger Moves On', *The Bulletin*, Dec/Jan, pp. 74–75.

Garver, Eugene, 1994, *Aristotle's Rhetoric: An Art of Character*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London.

Gilligan, Carol, 1982, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA & London.

Golsby-Smith, Tony, 2001, *'Pursuing the Art of Strategic Conversations: An investigation of the role of the liberal arts of rhetoric and poetry in the business world'*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Western Sydney.

Hawley, Janet, 2001, 'Confessions of a tree-hugger', *Good Weekend Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 September, pp. 33–40, John Fairfax Publications, Sydney.

Hay, Peter, 1998, 'Green Politics "In the System": Assessing the Obstacles to Labor/Green Power Sharing', *Ebbing of the Green Tide? Environmentalism, Public Opinion, and the Media in Australia*, occasional Paper Series No. 5, pp 103–125, School of Sociology and Social Work, University of Tasmania, Hobart.

MacIntyre, Alasdair, 1984, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed., University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana, USA.

McDonald, Roger, 2001, *The Tree in Changing Light*, A Knopf book, Random House, Sydney.

Mulligan, Martin and Hill, Stuart, 2001, *Ecological Pioneers: A Social History of Australian Ecological Thought and Action*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne.

Plumwood, Val, 1993, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Routledge, London.

Plumwood, Val, 2000, 'Belonging, Naming and Decolonisation', *Ecopolitics: Thought&Action*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 90–106.

Plumwood, Val, 2002, *Environmental Culture: The ecological crisis of reason*, Routledge, London.

Rose, Deborah Bird, 1996, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal views of Landscape and Wilderness*, Australian Heritage Commission, Canberrra.

Schumacher, E Fritz, 1973, *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*, Abacus, London.

Schumacher, E. Fritz, 1977, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, Harper Colophon Books, New York.

Taylor, Charles, 1989, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Van Tiggelen, John, 2002, 'Once were emus', *Good Weekend Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 February 2002.

Weston, Anthony, 1992, 'Before Environmental Ethics', *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 14 (Winter), pp. 312–338.

Wright, Judith, 1994, *Judith Wright: Collected Poems*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.